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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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COUNTRY USSR (Georgian SSR)

REPORT

SUBJECT Political Disturbances of
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A 10-page report on the Tbilisi riots of March 1956 and on Georgian reactions to the Stalin anniversary in March 1957

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COUNTRY: USSR (Georgian SSR)

SUBJECT: Political Disturbances of March 1956 in Tbilisi

1. According to custom, on the morning of 5 March 1956, the anniversary of Stalin's death, student delegations arrived at Stalin's statue in Tbilisi (N 41-42, E 44-45) with wreaths. The statue had been surrounded by militia guards since the early morning to prevent overcrowding as the wreaths were laid. Although the groups protested militia orders to remain at a considerable distance from the site - to preclude haranguing - they realized that the order was firm and, consequently, dispersed throughout the town. Subsequently, reports circulated to the effect that the memorial meeting had probably been proscribed by the authorities.

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2. In the afternoon crowds started to drift to the statue site to protest the official interdiction. In the late afternoon the guards suddenly disappeared, and the stage in front of the statue was taken by student speakers who eulogized Stalin while protesting the Soviet rulers (i.e., Khrushchev and Mikoyan), who, they said, were opposed to the personality cult only to belittle "the illustrious Georgian, Stalin". The speeches, which lasted until 2 A.M., contained progressively sharper protests against the insult to the memory of Stalin. At 2 A.M. a Georgian woman, a widow of a Hero of the Soviet Union who had been killed during World War II, took the platform to announce that the meeting was adjourned; she exhorted the crowd to reconvene at 6 A.M., however, to stop work the following day, and to demonstrate reverence for the memory of Stalin. At the end of the meeting the public was informed that a Committee of Free Georgia, consisting of students from the Stalin University in Tbilisi, had been established. A guard of honor of youths was left at the statue for the duration of the night.
3. On 6 March at 10 A.M. snowballing crowds of youths and adults thronged from all parts of the city towards the site of the statue, carrying pictures of Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Molotov, and Kaganovich. A holiday atmosphere prevailed throughout

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the town, with houses and shop windows decorated with pictures of Stalin. The demonstrations lasted until the afternoon, and, when the crowd became very dense, it broke up and concentrated at the Stalin Statue and the Central Square (tsentralnaya ploshchad). At both points speakers from all walks of life appeared; their speeches were characterized by opposition to the government and the regime. A 70-year-old kolkhoz member spoke about the poverty prevailing at his settlement; a war invalid said that Stalin had been his motive for going to war, and now his memory was to be erased. Khrushchev and Mikoyan were targets of defamation. A ten-year-old girl recited a poem ending with the words: "The wise stay on the soil and the fools in the Kremlin (imniye ludie na zemle a duraki v kremle)". Meanwhile, all traffic in town had stopped and loudspeakers which had been installed on vehicles requested the public to participate in the demonstration. The speeches lasted throughout the night.

4. On the morning of 7 March, the demonstrators marched toward the Armenian quarter to the 26 Komissarov quarter, headed by a sleigh containing caricatures of Khrushchev (resembling a pig) and of Mikoyan. Meanwhile, a rumor was spreading that Chinese Deputy Chairman Marshal Chu-Te had arrived in Tbilisi that morning, whereupon loudspeakers announced that the

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demonstration was to head toward his quarters in Beria's former residence five kilometers away. Fifty thousand persons started marching to the residence, which was surrounded by military guards (probably MVD soldiers armed with machine guns). As the demonstrators approached the mansion and called upon Chu-Te to come forward, someone appeared on the balcony of the house and announced that Chu-Te was not there at all. Leaders of the demonstration, however, had been reliably informed that he was there, and demands for his presence lasted two or three hours. Finally, a small delegation of the demonstrators entered the house, and a short while later the Chinese marshal appeared on the balcony, accompanied by the secretary of the Central Committee and members of the Georgian government. He was received with loud and repeated shouts of "Lenin-Stalin", after which one of the demonstrators read a note of protest against the denigration of Stalin instigated by Khrushchev which concluded with a query as to the whereabouts of Stalin's son Vasily. Chu-Te answered in broken Russian, promising that the Lenin-Stalin line would continue to direct all actions of the Communist Party throughout the world. He also assured the public that Vasily Stalin was staying at a safe place in China. After receiving a note

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of protests which he promised to deliver to Mao Tse-Tung,
Chu-Te asked the crowd to disperse quietly and return to
work. The meeting cheered the demonstrators considerably,
and they returned to the town center in high spirits. The
mob dispersed to the Naberezhnaya and at the Central Square.

5. With the exception of the gorsovet and the Headquarters of
the Transcaucasian Military District, all of the buildings
in the center of town were decorated with pictures of Stalin.
One of the speakers at the Central Square called upon the
public to compel these institutions to display the pictures.
Several demonstrators climbed into the gorsovet, found Stalin
pictures, and hung them in front of the building while the
crowd cheered. The public then approached military head-
quarters, which was under guard, and for two solid hours -
undaunted by the pouring rain - demanded that pictures of
Stalin be shown. When no reaction came from the building,
several youths climbed up to its roof and lowered huge pic-
tures of Stalin to the front, accompanied by the cheering
of the crowd. Since there was no retaliation from the mili-
tary guards, the crowd moved to the buildings occupied by the
Central Committee and the republican MVD and similarly decorated
them.

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6. Meanwhile, the demonstrations continued with speakers from all walks of life, notably writers, professionals, and poets. One poet even managed to compose a poem on the spot to read to the enthusiastic public. From time to time loudspeaker announcements proclaimed that prominent people had joined the demonstration.
7. Train traffic to Moscow was not interrupted, although trains were covered with slogans commemorating Stalin.
8. On 9 March, the anniversary of Stalin's funeral, the local Russian paper Zaria Vostoka and the Georgian paper Komunist featured a picture and biography of Stalin on the front page. The Tbilisi radio station also called upon the public to hang black flags in memory of Stalin's funeral. Both measures were officially instigated and were aimed at conciliating the public, but the people considered that they were not commensurate to the greatness of Stalin. At 11 A.M. loudspeakers at the Naberezhnaya announced that the secretary of the Georgian Central Committee was asking for public consent to address the demonstrators. When favorably received, he addressed the assembly "as one Georgian to another", a comment

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which gave rise to catcalls and prolonged shouts that he was a traitor to the Georgian people. When the crowd quieted down, the secretary said that the Party had done everything to honor Stalin's memory, and asked the public to disperse quietly and return to work, under threat of stronger steps against the demonstrators. He was immediately hooted off the stage. The demonstrators then returned to their normal course, with speakers censuring the threats of the secretary. Georgian national flags began appearing on buildings. Toward evening searchlights were installed in many places, and armored cars suddenly began passing through the streets. Between 8 and 9 P.M. it was announced by loudspeaker that cables of sympathy with the stand taken by the Georgian students had been received from the Universities of Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. The announcement aroused great enthusiasm, and it was immediately decided to dispatch acknowledgements as well as a cable to the Kremlin demanding Khrushchev's deposal and Georgian independence. A list of members for a provisional Georgian government was drafted, and a few dozen people were selected to go to the main post office to dispatch the telegrams, accompanied by a large crowd. When they approached the main post office, they spotted a military radio car near the side of the building which was continuously transmitting

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messages about the situation. The public entered the building, but when one group tried to get to the third floor where the television transmitting station was situated, several machine gun volleys were heard. It was immediately known that there were wounded and dead among those who had tried to enter the station; bloodstained shirts and blouses were carried out of the building and hung on Stalin's statue at the Naberezhnaya. Meanwhile word passed around to go to the arsenal and get arms for defense.

9. At that time tanks appeared in the streets and it was realized that the town was surrounded by military units. The Georgian division, which was stationed in Gory (N 41-58, E 44-07), the birthplace of Stalin, was cut off from the town and was also put under siege. The tanks moved to Stalin's statue at the Naberezhnaya, and surrounded the area, leaving only a narrow passage for the public. When the tanks started shooting into the air to frighten the crowd and compel it to disperse, the speakers called upon the crowd to remain and keep cool, but many people left in fright in order to hide in the vicinity. Troops entered Tbilisi and formed a cordon around the crowd at the statue. Shots whistled by, and many persons who had hidden among nearby shrubs and trees were hit, while those who resisted the troops were thrown into the river. The

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aforementioned widow, after covering herself in Stalin's picture and declaring that she would not budge, was bayoneted by the soldiers. A small group of demonstration leaders who had remained next to the statue were arrested and put into a military car.

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10. At 2 A.M. the Tbilisi radio station announced that martial law had been proclaimed because American parachutists had tried to organize disturbances in Tbilisi. In the morning posters were put up on the walls of buildings by the Central Committee and the Komsomol which called on the public to return to work and maintain order. Patrols of tanks, armored cars and soldiers filled the streets. On the morning of the tenth, the public again tried to assemble near Stalin's statue, but speechmaking attempts were immediately suppressed and the crowd was forcibly dispersed. Those who provoked the soldiers or censured them for using force were arrested on the spot. The Russian and Ukrainian composition of the military units caused much bitterness among the Georgians. Martial law lasted for three days until the situation returned to normal. The organizers of the demonstration were originally given heavy prison sentences, but several months later, when the verdicts were appealed, the charge was changed from attempted rebellion

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to hooliganism and the sentences were reduced to one or two years.

11. During the same period in March 1957 a mounted militia guard stationed near the Stalin statue from the early hours of the morning allowed delegations to lay their wreaths there but not to congregate. A small group of youths which tried to assemble around the statue was chased away by the mounted guard. Pictures of Stalin and of his son Vasily were sold in the town.

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